

Promising Practice: Incentive Program Eastern Gateway Community College

Eastern Gateway Community College's Project HOPE has developed an incentive program designed to address student retention and course completion issues. This program rewards students with "HOPE rewards" for excellence in areas like participation, attendance, and academic success, and allows students to redeem their "rewards" for specific items.

Developed with input from Eastern Gateway's federal project officer, the Project HOPE incentive program is introduced to students during their orientation to the HPOG program, and is further discussed in the students' policy and procedure manuals. The program is structured using a system where different accomplishments are associated with specific "HOPE rewards" values. For example, perfect attendance for one week of classes is worth 20 points; a 4.0 GPA is rewarded with 100 points; and self-sufficiency (i.e., a student does not utilize any financial support services for an entire academic term) results in 400 points.

Among the items that a student can purchase with their points are educational program supplies such as scrubs, stethoscopes, and duty shoes. Other items include: dry goods, personal hygiene items, health and beauty products, baby products, and household supplies. Students must sign a tracking form to verify receipt of their items.

Project Administrator Shari Prichard reports that the incentive program has resulted in a marked improvement in class attendance rates. She attributes this success specifically to the program's policy of having students submit attendance sheets signed by instructors, and the fact that students can redeem their points for gas cards.

For other HPOG grantees looking to implement incentive programs, Ms. Prichard recommends talking with students to identify commonly needed items that can be offered as rewards. It is especially beneficial to students when the items offered by the incentive program are those which cannot be purchased using other means of assistance. For instance, Project HOPE students typically redeem their points for diapers or utility vouchers, as these items cannot be obtained using food stamps. Similarly, Ms. Prichard suggests that grantees confirm with their federal project officers the items they can or cannot offer as rewards according to grant regulations. She also encourages HPOG directors to prepare a well-articulated and thoughtful point value system to ensure that the HPOG program has the funds necessary to purchase all the items offered as rewards.

Finally, Ms. Prichard recommends other grantees be prepared to handle students' requests to redeem points for unallowable items. For instance, Project HOPE experienced a large number of students wishing to redeem their points for gifts during the holiday season. As the project could not use grant funds to purchase these items, Ms. Prichard's team implemented a used toy exchange for students, allowing them to keep their earned points while still obtaining gifts for their families.

